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Simon Coffey\* and Constant Leung

# Understanding agency and constraints in the conception of creativity in the language classroom

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**Abstract:** In this paper we investigate the ways in which creativity is understood and enacted by language teachers. Although the term ‘creativity’ has gained enormous traction in language pedagogy, and in education more generally, we suggest that the concept remains a floating signifier carrying different personal connotations that are shaped by wider institutional and professional constraints. We report on interview data with practising language teachers who discuss their interpretation of creativity and how it manifests in their classrooms. Our analysis considered how teachers positioned themselves and their students in relation to each other and how the agency of the different actors was shaped by discursive constructions (of creativity) which were, in turn, underpinned by broader socio-historical and disciplinary frames. In particular, we focus on distinctions between creative *language* and creative *language teaching* and how these are construed differently across professional contexts. While teachers are keen to adopt creative approaches, findings show that there are significant differences in their interpretations of the concept that point to deeply rooted epistemological dissonances in the perception of language and personhood in the pedagogical encounter. In the final section we develop the implications of these findings for professional cultures and identities, in particular some of the critical but under-explored issues surrounding the idea of creativity in language teaching, including the ever-present ‘teacher-ledness’, the curricularised nature of taught languages and the absence of personal development.

**Keywords:** Creativity, Language teaching, Teacher cognition

## 1 Introduction

In this paper we draw on extracts from curriculum syllabus documents and textbooks to interrogate how creativity is understood by teachers, not as

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agents of creativity but as channels to stimulate and elaborate their individual interpretation of the notion of creativity arising from the way language constructs and constrains our acting in the world.

Conceptualising language teaching as comprising, *inter alia*, creativity stands in contrast to the functionalism of communicative language teaching which has dominated language education in recent decades. This functionalism has been shored up largely by the marketisation of teaching and learning and the accompanying instrumentalisation of language – particularly English – for a narrowly prescribed range of uses. Such a paradigm positions the learner as a market consumer and the act of engaging with new language as an acquisition of incremental and countable skills. We see the recent focus on creativity in language teaching as a response to dissatisfaction with the narrow instrumentalism of communicative language teaching and the renewed debate over appropriate pedagogies at a time when the old methodological certainties are giving way to critical appraisals (Canagarajah 2006, Canagarajah 2011; The Douglas Fir Group 2016; Kumaravadivelu 2001, Kumaravadivelu 2012). The proliferation of paradigmatic ‘turns’ in applied linguistics, including second language acquisition (SLA) theory and research, have seen a move from a focus on personal, psychological motivation toward framing learning as a social practice, and from learning as a mainly intra-individual cognitive process to a broader understanding of learning as involving socially connected emotion, identity and embodiment.

The call for language teaching to embrace creativity is in evidence in language programme documentation (e.g. the 2014 National Curriculum for Languages in England) as well as in applied linguistics research (e.g. there are two new AILA research networks taking creativity as their central motif). This new direction raises questions about what counts as teacher professionalism. Just as it is no longer axiomatic that ‘good teaching’ is about adherence to a particular approach (Kumaravadivelu 2001), the call for creativity in language teaching has renewed the debate on teacher professionalism. If creativity requires teachers to take account of a wide range of educational and learning issues in context, and at the same time to have recourse to established teaching methodologies, then it is quite clear that we are asking teachers to make pedagogic decisions in the light of these demands in their working contexts. So, an element of ‘thinking outside the box’ and independent decision-making would be a necessary part of teacher professionalism (see Leung 2013 for a wider discussion on this point). We will elaborate on some of these issues in the discussion section later.

## 2 Researching teachers' understandings of creativity

Our investigation was prompted by our interest, as teacher educators, in how the term creativity is being perceived in today's language 'market'. We wanted to know to what extent the participant teachers believed in it as a new innovation, if it is something they 'do' anyway or if the term is simply understood as a marketing ploy. We were also interested in how they interpreted creativity in relation to their classroom practice and how or if it signalled a break from received notions of good practice. Coffey has long advocated a broader understanding of the social and emotional drivers behind language learning in UK schools, while Leung has called for a problematising of communicative competence to take into account local language sensitivities. Our discussion draws on the data from interviews with five languages teachers, all of whom were MA students at King's College London and therefore known by us (four working in London and one on the south coast of England, Table 1 below). We asked them 'what do you understand creativity to mean in your teaching?' with prompts and subsidiary questions from a schedule<sup>1</sup> to explore this central concern.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted in 2013. All participants signed consent forms agreeing to have their words published in anonymised form. The interviews generated a data set which we analysed through a grounded approach (as outlined by Charmaz 2006)<sup>2</sup>, focusing on recurring definitional themes, positioning strategies and discursive iterations in the examples participants gave. From

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### 1

- Please tell me a little about yourself and your professional trajectory as a teacher.
- We are investigating what 'creativity' means in different contexts of language teaching. Can you say something about what that means to you? (Is creativity something that you are aware of as such or something that you incorporate spontaneously?)
- What input have you had vis-à-vis creativity (your initial teacher training / in CPD / and any other influences)?
- Could you give an example of an activity or strategy that you might describe as creative?
- Is creativity in language teaching about teacher-initiated strategies or does it come from the student? / How do we mesh wanting to be creative with the language needs of particular student groups?

Is creativity a 'luxury' / an 'extra' (or an integral part of learning a language)

2 We first grouped together *deductive* codes, that is according to the response elicitation resulting directly from the research instrument, and then comparing codes and categorising data chunks to make *inductive inferences* through close interpretation (Hennink et al. 2011), paying particular attention to repetition and recurrence of *in vivo* codes.

**Table 1:** Participant teachers.

Name*	age	nationality	Professional context
Katarina	36	Polish	EFL in London; she teaches general English and is director of studies
Juana	31	Mexican	EFL in London; she teaches general English and teacher education courses
Stephen	26	British	EFL in London
Elodie	29	French	secondary school teacher of French and Spanish teacher in London; also gives one to one classes to adolescents and adults
Colin	52	British	EFL on the English south coast, and part-time German in secondary schools

\*Pseudonyms

our initial set of codes<sup>3</sup> we arrived at three themes which are relevant to our discussion, the first two posit binary constructions and the third a broader context-specific frame which may help us to understand why forms of creativity can be perceived as advantageous for increasing student engagement, but also indicate that this perception may be countered by a perception of risk. We will now report on these themes with our commentary extended in the discussion section.

## 2.1 Creative language vs creative pedagogy

The first theme we identified is the distinction between creative *language* and creative *pedagogy*. We cite as an example the response by Stephen, a young British EFL teacher in London who had just completed an MA in English Language Teaching. We began by asking the teachers to say what ‘creativity’ means for them in their teaching. At the time of interview Stephen explained that his MA group had recently been asked to answer a questionnaire which included the question ‘Do you use language creatively (in your teaching)?’. When

**3** We initially coded for:

- Definitions of creativity: 1.) relating to me (the teacher) and 2.) relating to what I do in the classroom
- Modes of self-presentation as a creative teacher / person
- Advantages / mitigating factors cited by each participant, and then these were grouped according to ‘institutional norms’, ‘risk (to face)’
- Examples given by teachers of strategies and activities to illustrate how they are creative

Training / professional development for creativity

asked how his peers on the MA responded, he said that none of the group “really knew how to answer it”:

I think no-one really tried to define ... they were mainly concerned with levels of proficiency and perhaps thinking someone can use the language creatively but (if learners) make grammatical mistakes ‘what do we do with that?’. (Stephen)

This response highlights the problem of defining or identifying creativity and our rationale for conducting the present study. Stephen’s response suggests a conventional notion of language proficiency, characterised here by ‘levels’, as teachers’ primary concern. Furthermore, Stephen was the only participant in our study who exclusively equated ‘creative language’ with ‘literary language’ (poetry and fiction). According to him, ‘creative language’ implied a novel approach to language in contradistinction with mundane communication, and this order of language enabled students to engage more profoundly with the language being learnt:

using a language either in a textual context or a social context where language is used in a way that we would not consider ordinary. So, using language with the right collocations and right linguistics patterns but trying to convey meaning which is not the ordinary one. (Stephen)

Stephen’s understanding of creativity as the inclusion and development of literary registers – using language in a way beyond ‘the ordinary’ – accords with a traditional view of foreign language study as a field offering the potential for development within a cultural humanist, also called ‘liberal arts’, tradition. Within this rationale, language teaching goes beyond its basic practical function; it should also be concerned with ‘educating’ the student into higher, more refined understanding of self and the world. In the national educational model that developed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, this rationale – which has long formed the cornerstone of studying ancient languages – contributed to the emergence of ‘modern languages’ (or ‘*langues vivantes*’, *Spracherleben*) as a worthwhile discipline for study at school and university.

The dichotomy between literary and non-literary language presents some interesting distinctions which pose challenges for teachers as well as for theories of language. If such a distinction is accepted, then Stephen’s statement that “I must say I would not go in using creative language with beginner students” supports the thesis that students need the basic language toolkit (some vocabulary, understanding of grammar) before being able to manipulate these in a ‘creative’ way. This invokes the classical model (e.g. grammar school Latin) wherein basic language paves the way for more interesting ‘content’ work which draws on literary devices and creative writing.

When asked the same initial question, the other teachers did not assume a creative = literary link in their interviews. Instead, the other participants focused on creativity as a strategy for teaching, to promote learning and student motivation. While this goal would obviously be shared by Stephen, the others did not challenge the curriculum language *content*, but rather suggested more fun, spontaneous, and enjoyable ways to present and practise the language within a prescribed syllabus of ‘communicative’ (i.e. ‘bulge’, explained below) language. Their focus is not therefore on creative ‘language’ per se but on creative pedagogy, whereby it is incumbent upon the teacher to maintain student interest through deploying teaching strategies creatively.

### 2.1.1 Describing creative pedagogy

Strategies described by the teachers included either introducing a novel ludic dimension or being able to respond to students’ question or need for clarification in a spontaneous, flexible manner. For instance, Colin used drawings in his lessons – both spontaneously on the board or prepared beforehand on A3 sheets of paper – to illustrate lexical items and also to storyboard short narratives that served to engender dialogues within a visual context. Juana and Katarina both gave as examples of creative teaching the ability to ‘think on your feet’ and to ‘think outside of the box’. In the extract shown here Katarina gives an example of (her definition of) creativity as the way she explains words in context, in this case helping her students to understand the concept of the verb explaining the verb *to encourage*:

(I ask) ‘does anybody know what it means?’. Nobody knows, so you explain. It means try to push somebody to do something, try to give them motivation. So then you explain, obviously the students have a concept but not really, so you need to be creative i.e. you need to think on your feet, you need to think of ways of getting through to them ... It’s good to observe experienced teachers do that because you can think, ok, ‘how can you make it clear to them, what is this *encourage*?’ so a good concept question would be trying to put it in a context, for example if I have a child, a small child and I try to encourage them not to be scared of the water, of the sea, ‘how can I encourage them?’, and you elicit from the students ‘come on, it’ll be fine, mummy’s here’, whatever, and that’s, you know, you elicit that from the students, and for me that’s creativity, because that’s thinking on your feet and putting it in context for your learners so they understand it better. (Katarina)

In this extract we see that Katarina’s notion of creativity relates to the teacher’s ability to respond spontaneously to a learner problem (e.g. in understanding a concept) creatively (creative pedagogy) rather than actually emphasising creativity in student-sourced language or introducing ‘extra-ordinary’ language such as that

which could be defined as literary. When asked if she ever encourages students to use language creatively Katarina replied “it’s not something I’ve thought of to be honest. For me, personally, creativity doesn’t have this connotation”. When asked if she would include creative writing in her teaching, she explained that she would like to, but “in my teaching of writing I focus on models rather than creative writing ... they work very well with models because, you know, ‘this is what you’re supposed to achieve’ ...”. She explained that her students had very clear ideas about what their goals were and that creative writing would not be perceived as relevant by them in achieving these.

## 2.2 Creativity as a personal trait vs a professional skill

The second key theme that emerged from the interviews is the distinction between creativity as a personal trait (i.e. an innate characteristic of the teacher) and creativity as a professional skill (i.e. an attribute that can be acquired and developed through training and professional development). This distinction reveals a fundamental difference in the way ‘creativity’ can be understood as a personal-professional attribute. Two of the participants (Colin and Stephen) emphasised their own personal creative qualities relating to artistic pursuits, Colin as a painter-artist and Stephen as a poet. Stephen explained that

my case is a very specific one, because I consider myself a creative writer. In fact I’ve recently started writing poetry more professionally so I’ve always had the tendency to incorporate a bit of creative writing into my teaching. (Stephen)

This self-presentation as creative people, or teachers who are able to bring artistic assets to their teaching, presents a popular notion of creativity. Creativity as a personal trait in teaching has often been portrayed in film and fiction (e.g. ‘The Dead Poets’ Society’, ‘The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie’, ‘Dangerous Minds’) where the teacher is cast as the maverick who bucks the status quo (portrayed as dull and uninspired routine) to enliven students’ experience of learning with unorthodox methods. According to Moore (2004) this teacher type is inscribed in a discourse of teachers as ‘charismatic subjects’, and stands in opposition to what he calls ‘official discourses’ of teachers as either the ‘reflective practitioner’ or the ‘competent craftsman’.<sup>4</sup> The latter two draw less on personal attributes and refer to engaging with colleagues and professional practices through a reflective

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<sup>4</sup> The metaphor of the craftsman was heavily promoted by the former Secretary of State for Education in England, Michael Gove, who has said that ‘teaching is a craft and it is best learnt as an apprentice observing a master craftsman or woman’ (Gove 2010).



cycle of reviewing, staying informed and setting targets.<sup>5</sup> We do not wish to imply that Colin and Stephen set themselves up as mavericks per se but the salience in their replies of personal, artistic attributes confers a romantic and individualised asset that they bring along too their teaching rather than a professional skill learnt through training. The other teachers emphasised creativity as a learnt or acquired approach or strategy; the examples they gave, such as using the interactive whiteboard with a magic pen and ‘disappearing dialogue’, focused on ‘form’ rather than content, constituting a repertoire of practices that could be shared among colleagues as professional development.

### 2.3 Engaging students: Student satisfaction and the comfort zone

The third key theme we identified, and which we develop in our discussion, is the connection made by teachers between creativity and the variable concept of engagement as a professional goal. As mentioned, Juana and Katarina both gave as examples of creative teaching the ability to ‘think on your feet’ and to ‘think outside of the box’. This notion of spontaneity came through repeatedly in discussions with these experienced EFL professionals. Both had trained as English teachers in other countries and so were critically conscious of what they perceived as cultural differences in teacher education and in received notions of good practice. Juana in particular emphasised that when she leads teacher development courses for teachers of English from overseas she talks explicitly about teaching more creatively and even teaches a module called ‘creative methodology’. This involves, she explained, “trying to show teachers who come from other countries how to make their lessons varied and how to use different types of resources and to encourage them to try new things and new methods”. She then explained how teachers she had been training were resistant to the idea of not having a fully planned lesson (she had introduced to them the idea of paring back materials and lesson plans to allow space for spontaneity):

It’s still around a lexical set or around this topic, and I know that the emergent grammar is going to be this, the language is going to be this, and you more or less know where (the students) are going to take you, but they were saying, particularly the Chinese, they were

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<sup>5</sup> Moore (2004), argues that the two ‘official discourses’ of the ‘craftsperson’ and the ‘reflective practitioner’ differ in the way they position knowledge, the craftsperson model based on observation and inculcation of tacit knowledge and the reflective practitioner model appealing to a universal principle of reason which we can be arrived at logically and explicitly.

like ‘no, no, we can’t do that, it would be unprofessional, in our school we would never be allowed to do that, we would get fired!’. (Juana)

Thus conceived, creativity is presented as a risk, potentially threatening established institutional norms of pedagogy. This can be compared with Elodie’s concern, not so much with the threat to the teacher’s comfort zone, but to the potential discomfort experienced by her students who might be resistant to any departure from the putative routine lesson activities. Elodie felt that creativity could be inhibited in the secondary school classroom by adolescent students’ timidity or a fear of looking “geeky”. The freedom and confidence to go beyond the expected format depended, she says, on “the relationship between students and between students and teacher”. This assessment of ‘risk’ was shared by other teachers but signals in particular the nurturing, pastoral role of secondary school teachers rather than the commercial imperative to keep paying students satisfied in EFL schools. This latter dimension – the focus on student satisfaction – was salient in Katerina’s responses as she points out that “students these days are very demanding, they know what they want” and, later, that “creativity shows effort” (Katarina). From this perspective, we see that creativity is tied to student satisfaction within the context of teaching as a neo-liberal language market.

### 3 Discussion

In this next section we develop our thematic interpretations of the interview data and broaden the discussion to include how curriculum and professional cultures constrain notions of creativity. We start with the notion of student engagement, which, in private sector language schools in particular, has a commercial as well as a pedagogic dimension.

#### 3.1 Student engagement

Clearly, all the teacher participants expressed the intention to increase student engagement through creativity. The concept of engagement was linked to creativity by all participants, but this merits closer examination. Engagement has received considerable attention in the recent literature on emotion and language learning/teaching, especially drawing on the metaphor of *flow* proposed by Csíkszentmihályi (1996). Using creative artefacts such as skilfully executed drawings on the board and attractive resources or deploying creative strategies such as giving imaginative responses to aid concept comprehension would seem

to support an environment of flow inasmuch as students are carried through the lesson in an attentive state, and problems are anticipated and reduced to a feasible extent. Engagement thus defined is about facilitating students to go on and then stay on task. In the examples of this that we have shown earlier, the ‘agents’ of creativity were the teachers – albeit each interpreting the term according to personal positioning and professional constraints – and the creativity of students was limited to a more or less engaged response to teacher-led approaches and strategies.

Encouraging student-initiated creative responses will typically be contained within tight limits in a language lesson to avoid activities that might potentially be perceived as risky and to ensure language objectives are met in a structured way corresponding to student expectations. In the regular secondary school (K12 high school) context, the potential for risk was acknowledged as a student welfare issue. In EFL schools student discomfort is recognised as potentially dissatisfying students in an environment where student satisfaction is regarded as an essential, measurable commodity.

### 3.2 Curricularised language

Whilst, in a K-12 setting, languages, including modern foreign languages in Anglophone countries, are taught within the rationale of a broad-based programme of general education, in the EFL classroom a more instrumental rationale is assumed (i.e. why students would want to develop proficiency in English), and a more obvious ‘market’ dynamic prevails especially among the EFL teachers (like Katarina) with managerial roles. Linked to the instrumentalised commodification of language learning is the more narrowly perceived range of language itself. Perhaps at this point it would be helpful to problematise what counts as *language* in any formal curriculum. Following Stenhouse (1967, 1975) we would argue that any taught language in a curriculum is a selection of some specific elements of the focal language. The curricularised version of the focal language is not necessarily the self-same language as it exists in archives (e.g. literature, historical documents) and in actual circulation and use in society. So English, for instance, as a subject in school and university (both in and outside England) is an artefact constructed by education policy makers and curriculum designers. What is assembled and presented as subject ‘language’ at any one time is the outcome of selective inclusion reflecting prevailing aesthetic, cultural, moral, social and political values. In other words, language (English, French etc.) as a curricularised subject is an ideological edifice.

We can take the newly introduced General Certificate of Secondary Education language syllabuses (GCSE, school leaving examination) in England as an example. The content specifications are common across languages such as Chinese and Spanish. In the Pearson Edexcel GCSE Chinese (Spoken Mandarin/Cantonese) for the Listening test it is stated that

Students are assessed on their understanding of standard spoken Chinese by one or more speakers in a range of public and social settings. Students will respond to multiple-response and short-answer open-response questions based on a recording featuring male and female Chinese speakers.

(Pearson 2017: 3)

For the Reading and Understanding in Chinese:

Students are assessed on their understanding of written Chinese across a range of different types of texts, including advertisements, emails, letters, articles and literary texts ...

(Op.cit.:5)

The list of text types seems to indicate a possibility of the reading assessment tapping into a diverse range of domains of language use. However, even a cursory glance at the topic themes and the list of vocabulary and language expressions would suggest that the language content is oriented to expressing the student's own identity (e.g. who am I?), ideas about holiday, travel, school, future work and study, hobbies and pastimes such as sports and music, and 'global' issues such as the environment.

Our next example of curricularised language is drawn from the American-produced *Top Notch* series written by Saslow and Ascher (2006) to illustrate how EFL language curricula are firmly inscribed in the traditional of communicative competence to meet student-selected needs, such as for travel or for work. *Top Notch* is a six-level course for adult learners designed to prepare "students to interact successfully with both native and non-native speakers of English". The content material is organised in units, each of which has separate sections on vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, social language, and activities for listening, reading, and writing. The series also claims to have been designed to help "... students develop a cultural fluency by creating an awareness of the varied rules across cultures for: politeness, greetings and introductions, appropriateness of dress in different settings, conversation do's and taboos, table manners, and other similar issues" (2006: ix). Sensitivity to cross-cultural differences is built into some of the content material, e.g. the listening and speaking activity in Unit 1 (2006: 4) students are advised to be culturally sensitive when addressing others; they are given model expressions such as 'Do you mind if I call you Kazuko?' when asking a new acquaintance for permission to address them by their first name. In

addition to the culturally tuned language-learning activities, students are taught intercultural awareness as part of their language learning. For instance, in a unit entitled “Cultural Literacy” (Saslow and Ascher 2006) the section “Be culturally literate” contains “Vocabulary” for listening and practice:

Etiquette: the “rules” of polite behaviour

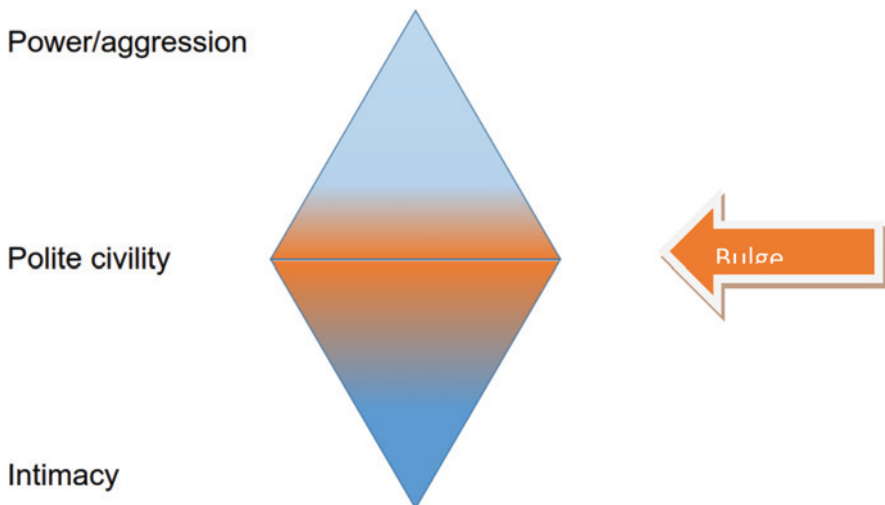
- When travelling, it’s important to be aware of the etiquette of the culture you will be visiting.

Cultural literacy: knowing about and respecting the culture of others and following

- their rules of etiquette when interacting with them.
- In today’s world, cultural literacy is essential to success and good relations with others.

(Saslow and Ascher 2006: 8)

The above examples obviously do not represent a full picture of the contents of *language* in the syllabuses and course books concerned. They do, however, illustrate the prevailing tendency for curricularised language to focus on relatively unemotionally transactional language being performed in the public domain with people who are not closely related to oneself, and whose social distance to oneself is not (yet) fixed, e.g. work place colleagues of equal rank. This accords with Wolfson’s (1986; also see Cook 2000) notion of the ‘bulge’ that characterises pre-patterned language expressions used by middle-class Americans (and more generally, middle-class English speakers from other places) for everyday functions such as apologising, complimenting and complaining.



In situations where social relationships are uncertain and are open to negotiation, people tend to want to signal as much social solidarity as possible and to avoid conflict or confrontation. This is the kind of ‘polite’ and non-offensive language that is regarded as suitable for use in the public domain and under the gaze of others. In contexts where social relationship is more clearly known or defined (by others) – i.e. above and below the bulge – the range of variegated language in terms of directness, endearment and rudeness is likely to be far greater. The tendency to converge on the bulge in curricularised language has implications for ‘creativity’ on language teaching.

### 3.3 Creative language beyond ‘the bulge’

We suggest that this functional orientation to language teaching and learning constrains the conception of creativity toward an understanding of creative pedagogy rather than creative *language* in a literary or non-bulge way. Some recent criticism of EFL has shown how course material presents a highly sanitised construction of language. For instance, recent work has highlighted the exclusively heteronormative assumptions shaping EFL/ESOL classroom interactions (Nelson 2006) and the deliberately bland topical content represented in language coursebooks (Gray 2010).

The distinction we found in our interview data between creative pedagogy (as spontaneous strategic responses) and creative language (as literary or ‘extraordinary’) reveals a deeper question about the purposes of the language curriculum and even language itself. In his construal of creative language as something above and beyond ordinary functions and grammar-talk, Stephen draws a line between creative and ordinary language, but this separation has been increasingly blurred in recent decades. For example, Carter (1996) points out that “creativity is pervasive in language use: in idioms and everyday metaphor; in jokes; in advertising and newspaper headlines; and in the highly patterned instances of literary texts” (p. 1). This echoes Tannen’s (1989) observation that “ordinary conversation is made up of linguistic strategies that have been thought quintessentially literary” (p. 1). Seen in this light, it could be difficult therefore, to draw the line between ordinary, basic language paving the way for more advanced creative language work. However, as we have suggested, curricularised language is not necessarily the same as language that exists in many guises in society – routine and mundane language, i.e. the bulge, is the norm, everything else is different and creative. And we presume that this is in keeping with Stephen’s intention, even simple language and minimal units of sound and lexis can be treated in a creative way, that is,

through such language strategies that are usually associated with literary learning e.g. alliteration, metaphor, rhythm or even by transposing mundane interactional language into an unexpected context.

A helpful way to bring together creative language and creative pedagogy is the notion of language *play* as expounded by Cook (2000) to describe language that falls either side of the “bulge” (Wolfson 1986). It would be easy to see that this re-framing of language as play in the classroom setting would have considerable consequences for the role of the teacher. Teachers who understand creative pedagogy as not entailing a fundamental shift of course content or classroom action, but rather as themselves being brighter, more efficient facilitators (through, for instance, producing better materials and giving effective explanations) do not need to challenge their own or their students’ view of language as purely instrumental. The role or self-image of the teacher links to the second key distinction we found in our data, that is to say, that of the innateness of creativity as a personal trait compared with its learned quality as a professional, developmental skill.

A teacher’s view of *themselves* as innately creative because of their personality or because they have a creative talent that they can bring to teaching may have a positive effect on their own self-efficacy as teacher-performers, but is unlikely to affect course content unless they are not working within any institutional constraints. This means that either the artistic-dimension is included as a supplement to core language work (Stephen) or it is used to enrich and engage set content (Colin).

### 3.4 Personal growth

Another dimension of creating opportunities for creative language use is to bring more of the ‘whole’ student into the classroom, metaphorically speaking. In a good deal of language teaching the main concern is to produce and provide appropriate and useful content for learning (however defined). The primary responsibility for this falls on the curriculum designer, the materials writer and the teacher. This orientation generally leads to a tacit transmission model (from knower to novice), even when the learning tasks and activities are hands-on and interactive. We can see this very clearly in our data. The participant teachers all seemed to accept as their responsibility to teach the curricularised language first and foremost; creativity, however conceptualised, is of a secondary order. However, for students to understand and use language creatively, they have to have the opportunity to engage with the focal language agentively to create new meanings for themselves. This sense of engagement is different

from that which involves following teacher-led activities. This entails two further pedagogic moves: to re-introduce the learner as a sentient multilingual and multicultural person, and to reconceptualise language learning as part of personal development.

For language learners to invest in the teaching-learning activities agentively and to make meanings anew to themselves and others, they have to have the opportunity to engage in tasks that are not completely scripted. For instance, in a speaking activity that comes with all the ‘bulge’ expressions already prescribed, the learner has little room to go beyond the scripted. What if the learner is encouraged to script their own utterances, drawing on their own knowledge and past experiences, some of which are likely to be encoded in another language and cultural practice/s? A classroom that offers such multi- or translingual use of language/s would be more conducive to agentive language use, drawing on more of the learner’s total linguistic and cultural repertoires. And this kind of agentive engagement in language learning is directly linked to the notion of personal growth. Dixon (1967: 6–7), in a seminal contribution to the re-setting of the agenda for language and literacy education, argues that the process and experience of using language is an intrinsic part of personal development:

... in sharing experience with others man is using language to make that experience real to himself ... in so doing each individual takes what he can from the shared store of experience and builds it into a world of his own.

Nystrand and Zeiser (1970)

argue that personal development can be encouraged and cultivated through curriculum activities that are associated with four creativity indicators: independence of approach, urge for expression, increased interest in details, and departure from stereotypes. All of this points to the need for space and time for learner-lead activities.

## 4 Conclusion

As demonstrated in our opening section, creativity is a buzzword that is appearing increasingly in research literature, teacher guides and curriculum programmes of study. Our study set out to investigate some of the ways it is understood by language teachers. Our analysis shows the term ‘creativity’ to be a floating signifier, imbued differentially with meaning according to professional context and personal beliefs. Unpacking this polysemy can help us to understand how the



concept shifts across contexts and has the potential to modify teachers' practices and beliefs about how students learn best in a classroom environment. Engagement in classroom activities and a concern for increasing enjoyment and learning progression appear key motifs underlying all the discussions with teachers, but what this looks like differs. The recent emphasis on how learners invest emotionally has given rise to a broader conception of language learning which draws on arts-based approaches – including a renewed interest in literary texts – and how language learning is inextricably tied to autobiographical identity projects. This in turn challenges traditional notions of proficiency which are linear and functional. Creative approaches, where these focus on increasing engagement through language play and renegotiation of the link between language and meaning, are still at the margins of most curricular planning, e.g. the CEFR, and so we see creativity as a valuable concept for encouraging a broader commitment to the professional dialogue around forms of language learning that go beyond the narrow instrumentalism of communicative dogma. Our findings suggest that for creativity to be an operational concept, we need to first understand the professional cultures and curricular goals in which it is inscribed. And finally, creativity is a multifaceted concept with many different manifestations. From the point of view of language education, we would need, as a minimum, to delineate what we mean from two perspectives: the teacher's and the student's.

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